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# U.S. officials see Gorbachov as a tougher adversary

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WASHINGTON — U.S. officials see Mikhail S. Gorbachov, 54, the new leader of the Soviet Union, as a tougher, more aggressive competitor than any they have faced since the late Leonid I. Brezhnev was at the peak of his powers, in the late 1970s.

"Gorbachov is no patsy," said one. "Just because a guy has a sense of humor doesn't mean he's a liberal."

The image of Gorbachov as a good-time charmer who might look a little more kindly toward the West surfaced late last year when he made a highly publicized trip to London — a trip the media gave generally positive reviews.

Said an intelligence analyst: "The fact that he has a pleasant, even charming personality doesn't mean that he will be less of a danger to U.S. interests."

President Reagan himself said yesterday that the United States did not

expect fundamental changes in Soviet policy in the short term with Gorbachov's ascension to power.

But the long run, many officials here believe, could be quite different.

Because of Gorbachov's age, intelligence and drive, officials think that he may have a better chance to consolidate power and put his own stamp on Soviet policies than any Soviet leader since Stalin.

Officials also do not think that the death of Soviet President Konstantin U. Chernenko Sunday night, and the selection of Gorbachov as his successor, will affect prospects in a new round of arms-control talks scheduled to open today in Geneva.

They note that prospects for progress in the talks have never been considered great and that the Soviet

leadership appears to have developed a consensus for the talks that is unlikely to change.

By the standards of Soviet leadership, Gorbachov is known as a relative moderate — but that term can be misleading.

A "moderate" in the context of Soviet leadership is a relative pragmatist, as opposed to several in the top echelons of power who are known as hard-line conservative ideologues.

In suggesting that Gorbachov is a relative moderate, U.S. officials do not mean that he is likely to extend an olive branch to the West or to change radically any of the hard-line postures toward the United States that Soviet officials have adopted in recent years.

In spite of the feeling that Gorbachov will be a tough competitor, he has also been the preferred candidate of top U.S. officials.

That, however, is because of the possible alternative. It has been

widely thought here that if Gorbachov did not make it, the choice would be Grigory V. Romanov, 62, a former Leningrad party leader who is known as a rough-and-tumble hard-liner.

Officials' observation that Gorbachov may be more of a challenge to the United States in the long run than recent leaders is also a commentary on the relative weakness of recent Soviet leaders.

The country, in fact, has had a crisis of leadership.

There has not been a truly firm hand on the tiller since Brezhnev's health began slipping in the early 1980s. Brezhnev, who died in November 1982, was considered relatively weak in his last years of power and was often out of sight.

His successor, Yuri V. Andropov, showed promise initially of establishing strong leadership, but he soon slipped into bad health himself, dying Feb. 9, 1984. His successor, Chernenko, was in such poor health that

he was never able to establish an image of firm leadership.

Officials here agree that the fundamental nature of the Soviet system, as it has evolved, is one of "consensus" leadership by members of the 10-member, ruling Politburo and top officials of the Communist Party.

"We're in for more consensus leadership now," one intelligence analyst predicted.

But he noted that Gorbachov would probably have a chance to go much further in establishing his own leadership in the years immediately ahead because so many other members of the Politburo are so old.

Half the members are 70 or older, and it may be presumed, this analyst noted, that several will die or drop out in the next few years, giving Gorbachov a chance to put his own people in top spots and gradually take complete control.

"It is unlikely he will upset any apple carts," another official said, "but he should be able to get control

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more quickly than, say, Brezhnev — who required about four or five years.”

There was little question here but that major decisions about the power shift in the Soviet Union, and the quick choice of Gorbachov, were the result of a carefully developed plan that probably evolved late last year.

Analysts here believe that the Soviet ruling elite decided that it had postponed for long enough the basic decision of transferring power to a younger man.

One theory here is that Gorbachov was dispatched on a trip to London late last year as a sort of “test” in diplomatic waters, which he seemed to pass.

British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher glowingly declared that he was the kind of leader she could do business with.

Analysts believe that that opinion was shared by many leaders in the West — a perception not lost on the ruling elite back home.